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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001495

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/SINGH/WERNER

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM ELAB LE SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: SPEAKER BERRI ON LABOR DEMONSTRATIONS,
SYRIA, LAHOUD'S FATE, AND THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE

REF: BEIRUT 1484

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶11. (C) In a 5/11 meeting with the Ambassador, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri downplayed the importance of the 5/10 demonstrations led by Hizballah, Amal, and Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (reftel). While Aoun may hope to topple the cabinet, Berri claimed credit for limiting Hizballah and Amal's aims to drawing attention to social and labor issues only. Now, if Prime Minister Siniora will meet labor leaders to discuss reform issues directly (i.e., doing the sort of backroom deals that Berri favors), there will be no more need for labor protests. Displaying political pettiness more openly than usual, Berri justified Amal's belated decision to participate in the 5/10 demonstrations on snubs from Siniora and "lies" from Saad Hariri. Discussing his 5/7 trip to Damascus, Berri denied that he had been pressured by Bashar al-Asad. Instead, Berri patted himself on the back for paving the way to a solution to the Syrian berms placed inside Lebanese territory in the Biqa'a Valley. He also claimed to have won Bashar's acquiescence to receive Fouad Siniora to address bilateral issues raised in the National Dialogue. Berri blamed the international community for President Emile Lahoud's continued tenure, insisting that international contact with the Syrians would have allowed him to solve the issue. Finally, Berri was downbeat on prospects for the May 16 session of the National Dialogue but vowed to keep the discussions going, to provide hope and a peaceful forum for debate. End summary and comment.

DEMONSTRATION RHETORIC TO THE CONTRARY,
BERRI CLAIMS PROTESTS WEREN'T ANTI-GOL

¶12. (C) In a one-on-one meeting with the Speaker, the Ambassador asked Berri's views on three unusual aspects of the 5/10 demonstrations led by Hizballah, Amal, and Michel Aoun's forces (reftel): 1) Why, if the demonstration was not pro-Syrian (as its organizers insisted it was not), did the demonstrators chant Syria, Iran, and Bashar repeatedly? 2) Why were Hizballah activists photographed putting on orange shirts, indicating that they were trying to make the Aounist participation appear larger than it in fact was? 3) How could Amal and Hizballah participate in a demonstration protesting the government, when both groups also participate in the government?

3) (C) Skipping the first two points, Berri went to the third: the demonstration, he insisted, was not anti-GOL --

at least not according to Hizballah and Amal. Aoun can claim what he wants, but Hizballah and Amal reject Aoun's idea of using the street to topple the cabinet. Indeed, Berri said, he should be given credit for opening up a split between Aoun and Hizballah: it was Berri who said publicly and repeatedly that Hizballah and Amal have limited aims, to allow the unions to demonstrate their concern about social and labor issues.

IF SINIORA TALKS TO UNIONS, NO NEED
FOR FURTHER LABOR DEMONSTRATIONS

¶4. (C) While marveling that this was the largest labor demonstration in Lebanon's history, Berri counseled the Ambassador not to place too much importance on it. "Naturally," when changes are discussed that affect people's benefits and job tenures, people will react with fear and uncertainty. The orderliness of the demonstration showed that Hizballah and Amal have no intentions of crossing a red line into violence and mayhem. The Ambassador asked about rumors that this was only the first of what are intended to be increasingly large and unruly protests. "Who said that besides Michel Aoun?" Berri asked. If PM Siniora will now sit down and meet with labor leaders to hear out their concerns and to give them the opportunity to hear from him directly how he plans to proceed on reforms, then there will be no further need for street demonstrations. The Ambassador asked whether Aoun agreed. "I don't care if he agrees or not," Berri said, emphasizing that he was speaking for Amal.

SNUBBED BY SINIORA, FACED WITH HARIRI "LIES,"
BERRI BELATEDLY HAS AMAL JOIN DEMONSTRATION

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¶5. (C) The Ambassador noted that the Amal movement decided only at the last moment to participate in the demonstration. Nodding, Berri said that he was waiting for Siniora to return from London, in hopes that the two of them could sit down together and work out a way to justify a cancellation of the demonstration. Berri waited and waited, and Siniora kept extending his London stay. Eventually, Berri called Siniora in London to ask his travel plans. When Siniora used poetic Arabic to note that he would be arriving with the rosy fingers of dawn on 5/10, Berri became annoyed: Siniora knew he wanted to meet with him, yet he planned his return to Lebanon so late that there was no time for consultations before the demonstration was slated to begin. (Comment: This is not exactly true. Siniora arrived at 5 a.m., and the demonstration did not begin until 3 p.m. But Berri made his decision at 10 p.m. the previous evening. End comment.)

¶6. (C) Moreover, Berri said, he never got a proper apology from Saad Hariri for "lies" published in al-Hayat earlier this week. According to Berri, Hariri complained that no one from Amal had participated in the funerals of Rafiq Hariri and Gebran Tueni. In the case of Hariri's 2/16 funeral, Berri noted, "I served as host, welcoming visitors -- I seated you and Bill Burns, remember!" After the funeral, Berri went to the Hariri house to pay condolences, and he claimed that his wife Randa spent four days straight helping to comfort Nazek Hariri. As for Tueni's funeral, Berri described crossing Parliament Square to enter the church. Onlookers chanted "Syrian agent!" as he passed, and "I told my bodyguards not to pay attention." After the funeral, he joined the family at the graveyard for the burial. While noting that he remembered vividly Berri's participation in both the Hariri and Tueni funerals, the Ambassador said that the causal linkage with the 5/10 demonstration escaped him. Displaying considerable irritation, Berri said that Hariri should not take him for granted and should not consider him a fool.

BERRI CLAIMS TO HAVE

¶7. (C) The Ambassador asked Berri about his 5/7 trip to Damascus. Berri denied the rumors both that he had been summoned by Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and that he had been lectured and pressured by Bashar. "I made the decision to go," he said, claiming to have watched in frustration as no one worked to reduce the tensions between Syria and Lebanon. Once again, no one appreciates the role he succeeded in playing. Because of Berri's interventions with Bashar, local Lebanese and Syrian officials are on the verge of solving the Syrian berms and border checkpoints that were recently moved inside Lebanese territory. Berri got Bashar to agree to receive Siniora, per the National Dialogue's request that Siniora discuss with Bashar border demarcation, Sheba'a Farms, and diplomatic relations. Berri also brokered a "very productive, very successful" meeting in London between Siniora and Syria's ambassador to the Court of St. James's. (Siniora told the Ambassador separately that, while the atmosphere was indeed more cordial than expected, the meeting had no substance, with the Syrian Ambassador claiming that Syria was incapable of anything as sophisticated as the murder of Hariri.)

SYRIA DID NOT AGREE TO DROP LAHOUD,
AND BERRI BLAMES INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS

¶8. (C) Berri said that he had been deeply disappointed, however, by his inability to get the Syrians to focus on removing Lebanese President Emile Lahoud. And that failure, he claimed, is due to the United States, France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and UN. "I told you to talk to the Syrians," he said. Had those international parties broached the subject of Lahoud with Syria, then those discussions would have paved the way for Berri to be successful in getting Syria to drop Lahoud. The Ambassador said that the Lebanese have the power to remove Lahoud on their own: if Berri instructed his bloc to work with the March 14 MPs, there would be sufficient votes to replace the President. Berri shook his head: Lebanon is too divided, and such a strategy risks plunging the country into violence. Syria needs to give Hizballah a green light. International approaches to Syria would do the trick. The Ambassador responded that no one was willing to pay a price to Syria when Syria should not have any say in Lebanon's presidency. "Do you want to solve the problem or

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not?" Berri harrumphed.

LOW EXPECTATIONS FOR 5/16 DIALOGUE

¶9. (C) Responding to the question about the May 16 reconvening of the National Dialogue, Berri said that he did not have high expectations. The issue of the presidency would be discussed again, with no results anticipated. Maybe he would steer the conversation to the next and final topic, Hizballah's arms, although he expected Hizballah would insist on moving sequentially. That would mean that the dialogue remains stuck on the presidency indefinitely. Berri said that he was committed to periodic sessions of the National Dialogue in any case, as the dialogue has reassured the Lebanese, brought confidence to the financial markets, and serves as a peaceful forum for debate.

FELTMAN